

CONFLICT IN YEMEN: SIMPLE PEOPLE, COMPLICATED CIRCUMSTANCES

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All the people we thought were dangerous are poor, simple farmers. They are nothing special. They are simple people. They seemed complicated because of the circumstances.

– Paul Dresch, quoting a Yemeni friend¹

Alluding to Yemeni politics, British diplomat Paul Dresch once borrowed a line from a comic novel, “*Je n’y comprends rien; j’en parle, j’en écris*” (I do not understand a thing; I speak about it, I write about it).² This absurdity mirrors the predicament of a foreigner attempting to understand the many layers that inform events in Yemen. The above epigraph is followed by the author’s rejoinder: “The knowledge and assumptions brought to such circumstances by Yemenis are far from simple.”³ Yet an understanding of the recent violence in Yemen’s northern province of Saada has proven elusive, even to those with a solid grasp of the complex circumstances underlying events in the region. A full media blackout and heavy propaganda from both sides make it difficult to separate fact from fiction.

The official narrative of the conflict may be roughly summarized as follows. A small group of religious extremists in

Saada, initially inspired by former member of parliament Husayn al-Huthi, took up arms against the Yemeni government in an attempt to seize by force a share of power greater than that which democratic means would yield. The group turned for help to sympathetic foreign Shia parties, specifically Iran and Hezbollah, and engaged in illegal measures and destructive guerrilla tactics against the armed forces in its attempt to restore the Yemeni imamate that was overthrown in 1962. The counter-narrative provided by the Huthis and their sympathizers highlights government repression of their traditional religious practices and explains the rebellion as an attempt to preserve these rights and defend against the state’s military heavy-handedness.

Given the complexities of the conflict in Saada, efforts to properly summarize it are often lacking in important details. What follows is an attempt to provide a concise picture that highlights some of

the conflict's main issues. It begins with a brief overview of the conflict and some background on Saada province, Zaydism in Yemen, and the al-Huthi family. The paper then turns to the historical factors that led to the initial clashes in 2004, emphasizing the rise of the Zaydi revivalist movement that became "the Huthis." The longest section is devoted to examining the official narrative of the conflict and providing additional factors that may help explain the persistence and growth of violence in its most recent iteration.

BACKGROUND

The spark for the conflict in Saada is often traced to January 2003, when Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Salih made a stop-over in Saada city en route to performing the hajj in Mecca. While attending Friday prayers at the city's mosque, the president hoped to say a few words but was drowned out by chants of "Allahu Akbar! Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse the Jews! Victory for Islam!" Government crackdowns against those chanting this slogan ensued, with more than 600 people arrested.⁴ Compounding the situation were occasional attacks on government installations in the province, blamed on members of the so-called Believing Youth (*al-Shabab al-Mumin*, later to become the "Huthis").⁵ These events led some members of Yemen's Zaydi community — of which the Believing Youth (BY) were a part — to feel they were being unfairly targeted by authorities, and attempts at reconciliation failed to avert an escalation.⁶ In the meantime, the sloganeering spread to other northern provinces. Provincial authorities and even the president asked Husayn al-Huthi, the leader of the BY, to appear before them and explain these activities,

but he either refused or, after agreeing to meet with the president, failed to appear.⁷

On June 18, 2004, Yemeni security forces arrested 640 people for chanting the same slogan outside the Great Mosque of the capital, Sanaa, following Friday prayers.⁸ A warrant was issued for the arrest of Husayn al-Huthi, and troops were sent to Saada province to bring him to Sanaa. When three soldiers were killed outside of Saada city, the government responded by launching a heavy military and bombing campaign, thus marking the beginning of the armed conflict.⁹ Husayn al-Huthi may have initially misunderstood the gravity of the conflict, sending the president an open letter which made it clear that they stood together against the enemies of the nation and the Muslim community.¹⁰ At the same time, he refused to turn himself in, and his followers clashed with government forces around Saada city and the mountains of Marran (in Haydan district, western Saada province), where al-Huthi evaded government forces for more than two months.¹¹ Al-Huthi was eventually killed in September of that year, thus ending the first round of fighting.

The government quickly moved to curb al-Huthi's influence, draping large posters of the dead man on the streets of Saada and launching a campaign of harassment against alleged sympathizers.¹² Husayn's father, Badr al-Din al-Huthi, and his younger brother, Abd al-Malik, were summoned to the capital with the promise — which was never implemented — that supporters would be freed in exchange.¹³ After waiting to meet the president for two months, Badr al-Din al-Huthi returned to Saada province, from which he is said to have led the clashes that broke out a few months later.¹⁴ Government heavy-hand-

edness had likely increased support for the Huthis, and their followers began carrying out attacks in some of Saada province's more populated areas, eliciting an even harsher military response.¹⁵ Although the government claimed to have secured most rebel positions in April 2005 (marking an end to the second round of fighting), clashes of varying intensity continued until February 2006, after which the government began taking conciliatory measures, including the release of various detainees and the appointment of a new provincial governor who worked to improve relations with the Huthis.

After nearly a year of relative calm, clashes of unprecedented scope broke out in early 2007. This round of fighting, the longest and bloodiest up to that point, came to an end with a February 2008 peace agreement brokered by the Qatari government. The agreement was short-lived, though, with both sides claiming the other had failed to live up to the accord.¹⁶ A short, but intense, fifth round was fought a few months later, this time with brief clashes reaching as far as Bani Hushaysh, a mere 20 kilometers from the capital. An inconclusive truce ended this stage, although regular skirmishes continued in some places, eventually coming to a head in August 2009, when the most recent violence broke out.

The sixth round of fighting, which ended when both parties agreed to a truce in February 2010, reached new levels of intensity. Saudi Arabia intervened directly against Huthi positions along its border with Yemen, after the Yemeni government had pledged to crush the rebels with a "scorched earth" policy.¹⁷ Alongside military operations, the government attempted to portray the conflict as an ideological and political battle wherein the Huthis intend

to seize control and impose their extremist political program. For their part, the Huthis claimed to be fighting in self-defense and for the protection of their constitutional and human rights. Husayn al-Huthi's sharp criticisms of American policy and the government's accusations of foreign backing for the Huthis have from the outset given the conflict an international dimension, something that was taken to a new level with Saudi Arabian military intervention in late 2009.

THE HUTHIS AND ZAYDISM

Located in the highlands of Yemen's northwest corner along the border with Saudi Arabia, mountainous Saada province is an impoverished and underserved region that has often been at the center of battles for political power in the country. The provincial capital of Saada was the seat of power for Yemen's first imamate and remained its capital until the seventeenth century. Despite the decline in its political fortunes, the region continued to be a center of scholarship for Zaydism, the branch of Shia Islam that provided the doctrinal underpinning for the Yemeni imamate. The region rose up against the Republican government that overthrew the imamate in 1962, with royalist (pro-imamate) supporters controlling it until 1967. Since then, government presence in Saada province has been weak and mostly military; at least five governors have served there since the outbreak of armed clashes in 2004, with none being able to maintain a proper balance among the various factions.

The Huthi family originates from the area of Huth in nearby Amran Province. In the 1950s, the family patriarch and influential Zaydi scholar Badr al-Din al-Huthi moved from Dahyan, a scholarly enclave near Saada city, to Marran, a small town

located in a mountainous part of the province's Haydan District.¹⁸ Given the leadership and influence exerted by Badr al-Din and many of his sons in the conflict, it is often referred to as the "Huthi Conflict."¹⁹ Some of the most important among them, in addition to the deceased Husayn al-Huthi (d. 2004), include Muhammad Badr al-Din al-Huthi, Husayn's older brother and one of the founders of the Believing Youth, which would form the base of the Huthi group's hardcore followers; Yahya Badr al-Din al-Huthi, a Yemeni member of parliament currently in Germany, who acts as group spokesman abroad; and Abd al-Malik Badr al-Din al-Huthi, the youngest brother and current field commander of the Huthi armed group.

References to the conflict often term it a "Shia Rebellion," in reference to the fact that the Huthis and most of their followers belong to Yemen's Shia Zaydi community.²⁰ While to some extent accurate, this generalization both obscures some of the conflict's main drivers and glosses over the fact that the Huthis are from a minority Shia branch, distinct from the more prevalent form practiced in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon.²¹ Zaydis, also known as "Fivers," comprise one of the three main surviving branches of Shia Islam, the other two being Imami (Twelvers) and Ismaili (Seveners).²² Zaydis split from other Shia after the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Husayn. While most Shia recognized Muhammad al-Baqir as imam, a small group, mostly based in Kufa (in present-day Iraq), supported a failed insurrection against the Umayyads led by al-Baqir's brother Zayd and in doing so recognized him as imam. Among other things, this put them at odds with the tradition — after Hassan and Husayn — of the imam's being passed directly from father to son. While the imam was to remain

within a certain bloodline (descendants of Hassan and Husayn), the fulfillment of certain conditions, rather than direct appointment, became the criterion for the Zaydi imam.²³

Various schools of Zaydism arose in the aftermath of Zayd's martyrdom.²⁴ What became Yemeni Zaydism was first formulated by al-Qassim al-Rassi (d. 860), a *sayyid* (pl. *sada*) living in the Hijaz region of present-day Saudi Arabia, whose grandson would found the Yemeni imamate. In 893, Yahya bin al-Husayn (al-Rassi's grandson) was invited by Yemeni tribes in the Saada region to arbitrate an ongoing dispute. Subsequently declaring himself imam under the title *al-Hadi ila-l-Haqq*, he spent the rest of his life attempting to exert control over areas surrounding his base in current Saada province. The fledgling Zaydi imamate established by al-Hadi would grow and — with varying degrees of control and periods of interregnum — rule over most of present-day Yemen for over 1,000 years.

ZAYDISM

Three main factors contributed to the decline of traditional Zaydism in contemporary Yemen. The first, dating to the 1800s, was the increased political and jurisprudential influence of non-sayyid Zaydi scholars and the consequent reformulation of some of the more stringent *hadawi* (derived from Imam al-Hadi) concepts.²⁵ The second was the 1962 overthrow of the imamate by Nasser-inspired army officers and the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic, which put an end to sayyid monopoly over political power. The third and most recent factor has been the spread of Salafi/Wahhabi ideas in traditionally Zaydi areas.²⁶

Various factors helped boost the spread of Salafism in Yemen, including

official encouragement from the governments of both Saudi Arabia and Yemen and the return of nearly one million Yemenis expelled from Saudi Arabia in the 1990s.²⁷ In stark contrast to the Zaydi tenet of rising up against an unjust ruler, the Salafist movement espoused political quietism and “loyalty to the political ruler even when that ruler is corrupt and unjust.”²⁸ Furthermore, its egalitarian language — in contrast to Zaydism’s sayyid exceptionalism — and its “clear, logical doctrines,” likely resonated with young men from tribal and low-status “butcher” families and “successfully mobilized a hitherto dormant resentment of key tenets of Zaydism.”²⁹

In the 1980s, Zaydi educational activities were limited and mostly involved the older generations.³⁰ The greater freedom of association following the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 allowed Zaydi leaders to create the *Hizb al-Haqq*, a political party aimed at reasserting Zaydi identity. At the grassroots level, in 1991, Muhammad Badr al-Din al-Huthi and others began holding summer study sessions for youths in Dahyan, calling themselves the “Believing Youth Club.” By 1994, the club had around 50 branches representing all districts of Saada province as well as various other provinces, at its height enrolling 15,000 students. They also began printing and distributing Zaydi literature, including nineteenth-century defenses of hadawi ideas.³¹

In a region that had enjoyed few of the promised benefits of the 1962 revolution, the BY was able to achieve a goal that had eluded both the government and the opposition parties: to build a solid base with support from a broad spectrum of social classes. At the same time, they gained the allegiance of various tribes that had been excluded from the government’s patronage

network.³² In order to bolster its religious legitimacy, the BY expanded its administrative council to include various Zaydi scholars as religious authorities, including Badr al-Din al-Huthi.

Internal fissures soon arose regarding the revivalist message, with some influential Zaydi scholars saying it was not faithful to true Zaydism. The disagreement reached the ears of the president, who in the mid-1990s called in BY leaders and the two Hizb al-Haqq members of parliament at the time — Husayn al-Huthi and Abdullah al-Razzami — to receive reassurances that the group was free of foreign influence.³³ By the late 1990s, though, the internal differences became irreconcilable and the ideological split also became a material and financial one. Most of the centers came under the control of a branch aligned with the more conservative thought of Badr al-Din al-Huthi, whose son Husayn soon arose as the leader of the group.

Husayn al-Huthi had been elected to parliament from Saada province (Haydan district) in 1993 as a member of Hizb al-Haqq. By the time of the 1997 elections, he quit organized politics and left for Sudan to pursue a master’s degree in Quranic studies. Upon his return, he became deeply involved in the BY, with printed copies and audio recordings of his lectures providing the guiding principles for the group.³⁴ His influences were wide-ranging, including traditional Hadawi thought, the Iranian Revolution, Lebanon’s Hezbollah, the Muslim Brothers and even the Salafi movement.³⁵ Although not explicitly calling for the return of the imamate, he believed that the greatness of the weakened *umma* (community) — which he felt was under siege and must be defended — could only be restored through sayyid rule.³⁶ Although highly political, his message was not an insurgent one, and

he believed that the Zaydi notion of rising up against unjust rulers (*khuruj*) should be done in a peaceful manner (through the parliament) and that he took up arms only because he was forced to do so.³⁷

The collision course with the government was set when, at al-Huthi's behest, the group adopted as its official slogan, "Allahu Akbar! Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse the Jews! Victory for Islam!"³⁸ The slogan was to always be repeated following Friday prayers. On the eve of the Iraq War, as anti-American protests rocked the Arab world, the slogan gained prominence. As noted earlier, it was chanted by a sizable group in the presence of the president in January 2003. In March 2003, a crowd of around 4,000 marched toward the American embassy in Sanaa, in what *The New York Times* described as "a chaotic confrontation" that left two dead and many injured, and in which those in the crowd were shouting "death to America."³⁹ Given the background of the USS *Cole* bombing in Yemen (and the fact that 10 of the suspects escaped from a Yemeni prison in April 2003), the official tolerance for overtly anti-American rhetoric in the country was low. The chanting of the slogan when the American ambassador went to Saada and his subsequent complaint to the Yemeni authorities likely did not improve the situation.⁴⁰

Even after the Yemeni government made it clear that it would not tolerate the slogan, al-Huthi refused to give in, indicating that he and his followers would stop only if a law prohibiting its use were passed. The government responded to this with threats.⁴¹ Abd al-Malik al-Huthi would later say that, although the slogan was what started the hostilities, it would be maintained at all costs, since free speech was guaranteed by the constitution.⁴² To date, the Huthis maintain the slogan.⁴³

When the government moved to arrest Husayn al-Huthi in 2004, his supporters proved to be well-prepared and extremely loyal. Through his charisma and ability to speak convincingly in clear and plain language, he was able to mobilize a large segment of disenfranchised youths. His ideas were empowering to the weak and the marginalized, allowing them to see themselves as active participants in the unfolding of history. Their loyalty to him was unwavering.⁴⁴ One may imagine that the government hoped that killing him would neutralize his followers; however, given the resiliency of the conflict — indeed its expansion — following Husayn al-Huthi's death, it is safe to say that this strategy has backfired.⁴⁵

OUTLAWS

The Huthi conflict is particularly difficult to untangle, given that, in the official narrative, it is motivated by a plethora of factors wherein religion, politics, and domestic and regional concerns mix freely and not always consistently. On June 25, 2004, *al-Motamar*, the official newspaper of Yemen's ruling party, published an article detailing the main charges against Husayn al-Huthi and his followers. These included specific transgressions against the laws of the country, such as carrying out armed attacks against government personnel and buildings, preventing people from paying government taxes, taking over mosques by force, lowering the national flag in government buildings and replacing it with a foreign (Hezbollah) flag, and accepting foreign assistance aimed at destabilizing the country. Added to the mix were accusations of conversion to the Imami branch of Shia Islam. The overriding goal of the Huthis was portrayed as the restoration of the imamate by force.

Although the Huthis have stated their commitment to the republican system and its laws and constitution, the official narrative continues to allege — even after the death of he who allegedly saw himself as imam — that they are fighting to restore the “divine right” (*al-Haqq al-Ilahi*) to rule that was wrested from them in 1962.⁴⁶ Somewhat grandiosely, Husayn al-Huthi was accused of possessing and circulating documents claiming that he was an imam and the Mahdi.⁴⁷ The Huthis are accused of rejecting any political system other than the imamate; a 2005 interview given by Badr al-Din al-Huthi to the Yemeni newspaper *al-Wasat* is often cited as evidence of this. In the (in)famous interview, al-Huthi said the imamate was the best form of rule, superior to democracy — which he rejected as a foreign concept — and that justice was the group’s guiding principle.⁴⁸ The Huthis have subsequently defended these statements, saying that they refer to doctrinal interpretation rather than political goals.⁴⁹ Yet, by not making the doctrinal concession of fully renouncing the idea of the imamate, the Huthis are forced to operate under suspicion.

While the politicization of the doctrine of the imamate merely casts the Huthis as retrograde and anti-democratic, the highlighting of other practices rooted in Huthi revivalism is meant to cast doubts on the movement’s Zaydi credentials. Specifically, the accusation is that “Huthi Zaydism” has more in common with imamism than with contemporary Zaydism.⁵⁰ Because these accusations rest on rhetorical and interpretive argument rather than factual evidence, they have become a centerpiece of discussions surrounding the Huthi conflict, often at the expense of substantive analysis.⁵¹ More important, this debate has led to the politicization of particular Zaydi

practices and, as such, has transformed the disagreement over Zaydi doctrine that surfaced within the BY in the 1990s into an issue of interest to the Muslim community as a whole.⁵²

One seemingly innocuous practice revolves around the Huthi views regarding the first three Muslim caliphs (Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman) and the Prophet’s companions. While many Zaydis accept the legitimacy of the first two caliphs, Imami Shia and some Zaydis claim that all three of them opposed the Prophet’s wishes.⁵³ When mentioning the names of the first three caliphs, Sunnis often append a phrase of blessing, a practice also followed by some Zaydis.⁵⁴ Others, including the Huthis, abstain from doing this, itself a practice known as *tawaqquf*.⁵⁵ A more extreme and uncommon practice is to curse them, though not regularly or openly. While the Huthis’ strongest detractors accuse them of teaching their followers to engage in this practice, some even see the practice of *tawaqquf* as inflammatory.⁵⁶ As with the doctrine of the imamate, some will accept nothing but full doctrinal concession from the Huthis, which for them would in turn be tantamount to abandoning Zaydism.⁵⁷

Another “Huthi practice” under attack is their engaging in celebrations deemed, as the official Yemeni Army newspaper (September 26) calls them, “alien to the Islamic creed and the Yemeni people,” which “engender mischief and break national unity.”⁵⁸ The reference is to *Id al-Ghadir*, a festival held to celebrate the Prophet’s sermon at Ghadir Khumm, where the Shia believe he invested Ali with leadership of the Muslim community. As Zaydi revivalism came into contention with Salafism, this celebration became one of the main arenas for airing these tensions.⁵⁹ The govern-

ment's displeasure with large Id al-Ghadir celebrations, which were not introduced to Yemen by the Huthis and are not new to Zaydism, is largely due to their function as a rallying point for Zaydi revivalism, involving Huthi followers coming together in strength. Government suppression only serves to reinforce their feelings of religious discrimination. As with their slogan, the Huthis have expressed their commitment to holding these celebrations at all costs, for reasons — among others — of freedom of religious expression.⁶⁰

The allegations of doctrinal convergence between "Huthi Zaydism" and imamism are used to buttress the most contentious allegation made against the Huthis, namely that they are one of Iran's proxies in the Arab world. The links to Iran are traced back to Husayn al-Huthi's admiration for the Iranian Revolution and the trips he and other Zaydi leaders made to Iran.⁶¹ To this is added Iran's media and political support for the Huthis.⁶² Substantive proof has been lacking, and since the conflict's beginning, the Yemeni government has qualified its allegations of Iranian support as "non-official" while continuing to pursue a friendly bilateral policy. In October 2009, as the Yemeni government struggled to contain the Huthis, accusations of Iranian involvement went "from being a joke to something serious."⁶³ That month, the Yemeni government abruptly postponed a planned visit by Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, citing "concerns by President Salih."⁶⁴ Shortly thereafter, Yemen claimed to have intercepted, in its territorial waters, an Iranian ship laden with anti-tank weapons destined for the Huthis. The Iranians immediately denied that weapons were on the ship. The Huthis, for their part, have consistently denied any Iranian or other foreign support.

Although there is no controversy regarding Husayn al-Huthi's admiration for both the Iranian Revolution and Lebanon's Hezbollah, no conclusive evidence points to this being of significance beyond providing inspiration. Both the Iranian government and Hezbollah have regularly denied providing the Huthis with material support. While accusations of foreign backing are centered on these two parties, others accused of supporting the Huthis have included Libya (where Yahya al-Huthi spent time until Yemen requested his extradition), groups within Iraq and the Eritrean government. Less credible allegations include coordination with al-Qaeda and the idea that the Huthis are supported by the U.S.-Iran alliance against Sunni Islam.⁶⁵

The final accusation made against the Huthis — that they violated the laws of the country — may carry the most weight. By running their own prisons and schools, naming their own mosque preachers and collecting *zakat* (tax) that should go to the provincial government, using violence against citizens and the government, and recruiting child soldiers, among others, the Huthis and their followers are said to have provoked the government's harsh response.⁶⁶ At the same time, one must consider the role of government policies in the region and the relative autonomy of tribal regions to understand that many of these practices were not novel.⁶⁷ Furthermore, the government's heavy-handed approach since the beginning of the conflict has likely increased support for the Huthis and antipathy toward the government.⁶⁸

THE SIXTH ROUND

The most recent round of fighting, which ended in February 2010, was by far the fiercest. It is estimated to have displaced more civilians than the five previ-

ous rounds combined, bringing the total to an estimated 250,000.⁶⁹ The sixth round broke out on August 10, 2009, with a decision by the Yemeni High Security Council and declarations by the president, followed by air strikes and rocket attacks in various parts of Saada province.⁷⁰ The official declaration came partly against the backdrop of the kidnapping of a group of foreigners, three of whom were later found dead. The government tried to blame it on the Huthis. The war expanded to include most districts of Saada province and the town of Harf Sufyan in Amran province, as well as neighboring Hajjah and al-Jawf provinces.

Both the violence and scope are unprecedented, as evinced by the following description:

This is the sixth war in Saada and Harf Sufyan, one of Yemen's most perplexing and confusing wars, one with contradictory information and scarcity of news.... The only truth known to all is that it is a destructive war that can be described as an incinerator, the fuel for which — on the Huthi side — comes from a group of desperate youths, frustrated and angry, besieged by extreme levels of ignorance and poverty, fighting zealously to achieve goals that have nothing to do with them. On the other side are simple soldiers from the armed and security forces, fighting in harsh conditions, crushed by poverty and destitution, feeling that there is no justice in this life. If defeated, their fate is death and the shame of becoming a prisoner; if victorious, the spoils of their victory will go to the leadership, which does not care about their conditions and reflects neither their interests nor those of other poor and simple people in this country.⁷¹

Some argue that the government has deliberately maintained the conflict since the death of Husayn al-Huthi, basing this allegation partly on the timing of the ceasefires — particularly following the fifth round of fighting — which have come when the Huthis are in a position of weakness and thus give them the chance to regroup.⁷² Indeed, during the period between the fifth and sixth rounds of fighting, the Huthis gained control, or were contesting all or at least parts, of four districts in Saada province.⁷³ The notion that the government (or factions therein) is intentionally keeping the conflict alive has most recently been tied to internal power struggles within the government.

In an interview from October 3, 2009, Hizb al-Haqq leader Hassan Zayd characterized the conflict as in part a battle between different wings of the government, specifically noting that in 2004 a Salafi-inspired group in power wished to drive a wedge between the president and the Zaydis.⁷⁴ Although not made explicit, the reference is to Ali Mushin al-Ahmar, commander of the First Armored Division and leader of the northwest forces that have been fighting the Huthis since 2004. Al-Ahmar has for some time been considered the military's most powerful figure. In addition to his alleged Salafi sympathies and contentious relationship with Zaydis, al-Ahmar is said to be a potential kingmaker in the upcoming battle for the presidency after Salih's current term expires in 2013.⁷⁵ It is no secret that Salih's son Ahmed, reputed to be at odds with Ali Muhsin, is being groomed for the presidency.⁷⁶ When Ali Muhsin's troops were unable to fully repel Huthi attacks along the border with Saudi Arabia, they were replaced by better-trained and -equipped

Republican Guard troops (under the general command of Ahmed Salih). In a rare instance of internal criticism, early in the sixth round of the conflict, the government mouthpiece *al-Thawra* published an article arguing that some within the government were not properly doing their jobs in the national interest and thus prolonging the conflict, a thinly veiled reference to Ali Muhsin.⁷⁷ As the attempted sidelining of Ali Muhsin becomes apparent, there are rumors that he himself is using the Huthis to undermine the government.

The absence of a military solution may have more to do with government inability than deliberate policy. The government has involved tribal groups in the conflict, as it previously did in 1962 and 1994. Tribal involvement in this particular conflict dates to 2007, when Shaykh Abdullah al-Ahmar (d. 2007), leader of the Hashid tribal confederation, called on the tribes of Saada to fight the Huthis, alleging they wanted to bring back a system of sayyid rule over the tribes.⁷⁸ In August 2009, the Yemeni army's official newspaper (September 26) reported that large armed tribal groups from throughout the country were headed to Saada to fight the Huthis.⁷⁹

Tribal involvement adds yet another dimension of complexity to this conflict. A brief overview of the case of Harf Sufyan is illustrative in this regard. Located in Amran province (approximately 40 kilometers south of Saada city) along the highway linking Sanaa and Saada, the town of Harf Sufyan was established around a weekly market and eventually expanded to a population of about 10,000. Illiteracy rates in the town are greater than 80 percent.⁸⁰ In the 1990s, the BY established a solid presence there, finding what Yemeni journalist Yahya al-Thilaya described as "a receptive environment to the culture

of the sayyid."⁸¹ While the first rounds of fighting were largely confined to Saada province, during the fourth one the Huthis threatened to open new fronts, including Harf Sufyan. Fighting eventually broke out there in 2008, with a longstanding tribal dispute between the Sufyan and al-Usaymat tribes overlapping with and becoming mixed into the conflict.⁸² Between the fifth and sixth rounds of fighting, the clashes between the two tribes continued, with over 50 people killed in the three months following November 2008.⁸³ Since then, Harf Sufyan has featured clashes between government-supported Hashid tribes and Huthi-supported Sufyan tribes (members of the Bakil tribal confederation), allegations of indiscriminate government attacks killing civilians and accusations of Saudi involvement, among others.⁸⁴

The government strategy of involving the tribes may also be read as aiming to deflect the Huthi challenge by transforming the conflict into a "tribal" one, with the added benefit of keeping the tribes divided and weak. Somewhat paradoxically, the recruitment of tribes may also be interpreted as an attempt to resolve the conflict in the face of government inability to do so. Although lack of government control in tribal regions may give a superficial impression of unruliness and unfettered violence, the tribal system has a more highly developed and proven conflict-resolution mechanism than does the modern Yemeni state. As summarized by Paul Dresch:

If the tribal system is to be seen as a source of problems for modern politics, it has also been capable of absorbing and indeed containing an extraordinary range of conflicts imposed on it from elsewhere in the course of the last thousand years.... It

has reduced most interventions to the terms already known to tribesmen, and for the moment it continues to do so.⁸⁵

A final factor feeding the armed conflict may be the rise of a self-perpetuating war economy.⁸⁶ The conflict has given the Yemeni army significant fighting experience while also attracting sizable military assistance from Saudi Arabia.⁸⁷ Saada province, with its parallel economy based on the smuggling of drugs, cars, weapons and medicine, among other things, has likely benefited economically. Procuring weapons is not an issue in the area, with al-Talh Market near Saada city considered the country's largest weapons bazaar.⁸⁸ Demand for weapons has soared during the Huthi conflict, and the government has been unable to eliminate the trade. Allegations have also surfaced that rebels have been provided with weapons from Republican Guard stockpiles to fight the regular army.⁸⁹

CONCLUSION

The Huthi conflict, which arose within a complex set of circumstances that include the rise of Salafism in Yemen and the effects of the Iraq War, has now become embedded in a web of larger issues that further complicate its resolution. Three are worth mentioning: the nature of political power in Yemen, regional competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the future of Zaydism.

Husayn al-Huthi provided an ideological challenge to the government's policy of controlling the tribal regions by maintaining their weakness and purchasing their loyalty. The response to al-Huthi's challenge may have signaled an attempt to change this policy. As Lisa Wedeen notes, "The regime's reaction to al-Huthi, so curiously disproportionate to al-Huthi's

apparent threat, must therefore be read as an effort and an opportunity to reassert — indeed, I even want to suggest to *establish* for the first time — the regime's territorial sovereignty in this area."⁹⁰ Yet, although the armed clashes may be an expression of a battle for authority in the province, victory by force is unlikely to yield a durable settlement. The prospects for a political accommodation may be no better, however. Granting the northern provinces a certain degree of autonomy — along the lines of what Yemen's Southern Movement is requesting for the southern provinces — would likely be blocked by a Saudi Arabian government fearful of any expression of Shia assertiveness along its borders.

One may imagine that the conflict — in part sustained by a power struggle within the government — will become easier to resolve once the intra-governmental positioning has been resolved, with the Huthi issue itself likely becoming an important card in the battle for succession. By bringing the issue of the imamate and hereditary succession into the public sphere, though, President Salih has exposed himself to charges of using the conflict to pave the way for his son to take power. This, in turn, has severely weakened the government's credibility when invoking the republic and democratic principles to justify its fight against the Huthis.

The battle for regional influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia has also likely played a role in keeping the Huthi conflict alive. Although evidence of its material support for the Huthis continues to be scant, Iran's political and media support for the group has created tensions with both the Yemeni and Saudi governments. While Saudi Arabia's ideal scenario is a calm and quiescent Saada province, the conflict has allowed it to continue

portraying Iran as dangerous and intent on meddling in Arab affairs. The conflict is a useful tool to help cement an Arab anti-Iranian alliance.

Claims that support for the Huthis is intended to provide Iran with a maritime presence along the Red Sea or — more grandiosely — as a launching pad for taking over Islam's holy sites seem farfetched. That said, having a “Huthi card” to play in negotiations on larger issues is an advantage for the Islamic Republic, which may wish to keep the conflict simmering without being directly implicated. Given the region's strategic importance, its proximity to the increasingly volatile Horn of Africa, and the multitude of problems confronting the weak Yemeni state (the Southern movement, al-Qaeda and a large underemployed and uneducated young population), there is real fear that the conflict may devolve into a destabilizing proxy war.

There is an additional though less visible component to the conflict: the struggle to define the role and form of religion in the contemporary context. Huthi detractors accuse them of taking up arms to rescue by force ideas that have been discredited in the public sphere. For their part, the Huthis claim that the suppression of legitimate Zaydi practices by a Salafi-leaning regime has forced them to follow this route. The violence may in part be rooted in the contradictory legacy of Zaydism. Although moderate and flexible in doctrine and ideology, the branch arose in the context of armed uprising and political defiance.

Muhammad al-Huthi, in his written account of the movement, responded to the question, “Who are the Huthis?” as follows: “We are the doctrinal, intellectual, cultural and ethical essence of Zaydism.”⁹¹ Zaydi moderates would disagree, saying that they, in fact, are Zaydism's

torchbearers and that their flexible theology will ensure that Zaydism survives and develops. Yet even Abd al-Karim Jadban, a former BY leader and prominent voice in the moderate camp, has expressed fears over the future of Zaydism. He points to three factors: a lack of interest in scholarly activity among the youth, the spread of Salafism, and the damage done by the Huthi conflict.⁹² Indeed, the Huthis would likely agree with the first two but replace the third factor, arguing that moderate Zaydis have been co-opted by an unjust and anti-Zaydi government.⁹³

At a broader level, the struggle for Zaydism is indicative of the ongoing debate regarding the role of Islam in the contemporary world. On a general level, this debate pits Western-backed and often unpopular “moderates” against “Islamist” groups that use religious language to mobilize the population against what they see as corrupt rulers and foreign interference. As is the case with other groups in the latter category, the Huthis have begun to combine anti-American rhetoric with another appeal: that “moderate” rulers respect what Western countries claim as basic political, religious and human rights.⁹⁴

The February 2010 ceasefire that ended the most recent round of fighting continues to hold despite occasional skirmishes and mutual distrust. This truce may prove more durable than previous ones. Various confidence-building measures have been taken to cement a Qatari-brokered agreement signed by both parties in August 2010, and in early 2011 the Yemeni government released a large number of Huthi detainees. There are, however, worrying signs. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which claimed a deadly bombing at an Id al-Ghadir procession in December 2010, has stepped up its rhetoric

against the Huthis, possibly in an attempt to reignite the conflict.⁹⁵ Yemen's troubles continue to mount, and balancing between political and economic reforms, on the one hand, and security and stability, on the other, is likely to become even more dif-

ficult for the embattled government. With other Arab states being forced to navigate previously uncharted territory, the future of this conflict appears as uncertain as that of the region as a whole.

¹ Cited in Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 214.

² Ibid., p. 82.

³ Ibid., p. 214.

⁴ *Mareb Press*, February 27, 2007, <http://marebpress.net/articles.php?id=1220>, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁵ Adel al-Ahmadi, *Al-Zahr wa-l-Hajar: al-Tamarrud al-Shia fi al-Yemen* (Sanaa: Markaz Nashwan al-Humairi, 2006), p. 141.

⁶ International Crisis Group, *Middle East Report*, No. 86, "Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb," May 27, 2009, p. 3.

⁷ By one account, al-Huthi intended to comply with the president's request but turned back en route to the capital after suspecting he would be murdered by the Americans; see *Nashwannews*, October 3, 2009, <http://www.nashwannews.com/news.php?action=view&id=2427>, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁸ The number 640 is found in Iris Glosemeyer, "Local Conflict, Global Spin: An Uprising in the Yemeni Highlands," *Middle East Report*, Vol. 232, Fall 2004, p. 44.

⁹ *Al-Huthiyya fi-l-Yemen* (Sanaa: Markaz al-Jazira al-Arabiyya li-l-Darasat wa-l-Buhuth, 2008), p. 188. There are varied accounts of when and why the escalation began. According to Glosemeyer, on June 20 the provincial governor tried to enter the Marran region (near Husayn al-Huthi's home) but was blocked by residents, after which tribesmen fired upon a military checkpoint, leading the governor to return with military reinforcements (Glosemeyer, "Local Conflict, Global Spin," op. cit., pp. 44-45).

¹⁰ The letter, from 28/06, reads in part: "I do not work against you, I appreciate you and what you do tremendously, but what I do is my solemn national duty against the enemy of Islam and the community: America and Israel. I am by your side, so do not listen to hypocrites and provocateurs, and trust that I am more sincere and honest to you than they are." Cited in Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power and Performance in Yemen* (The University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 154-55.

¹¹ A good summary of the fighting is provided in J.E. Peterson, "The al-Huthi Conflict in Yemen," *Arabian Peninsula Background Note*, August 2008, pp. 5-7, published on www.JEPeterson.net. For the most detailed work on the conflict, see the recently published Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon* (RAND Corporation, 2010).

¹² Ayman Hamidi, "Inscriptions of Violence in Northern Yemen: Haunting Histories, Unstable Moral Spaces," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 2, March 2009, p. 176. As Wedeen notes, "The image of al-Huthi's blood-spattered head made front-page news in the regime's daily newspaper, *al-Thawra*, and other newspapers followed suit" (Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, op. cit., p. 149).

¹³ *Nashwannews*, October 3, 2009.

¹⁴ *Al-Huthiyya fi-l-Yemen*, op. cit., p. 194. Some accounts have Badr al-Din al-Huthi "fleeing" from house arrest.

¹⁵ See J.E. Peterson, "The al-Huthi Conflict," op. cit., pp. 7-8. On government heavy-handedness, see Human Rights Watch, "Disappearances and Arbitrary Arrests in the Armed Conflict with Huthi Rebels in Yemen," October 2008, <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/75606/section/6>, accessed May 10, 2010.

¹⁶ International Crisis Group, *Middle East Report*, No. 86, op. cit., p. 22.

¹⁷ On September 27, 2009, in a speech celebrating the September 26 revolution, the Yemeni president said, "War against the al-Huthi rebels would continue until uprooting them even if it lasted ages." *Yemen Observer*, January 6, 2010, <http://www.yobserver.com/opinions/10017899.html>, accessed May 10, 2010.

¹⁸ *Aljazeera.net*, November 15, 2009, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/A0081F3F-000F-48B4-AC7D-3FDD9F4F9670.htm> (accessed May 10, 2010). The al-Huthis are a family of *sada* descended from the

Prophet Muhammad's family by way of his grandson Hassan. As such, they have a unique status in Yemeni tribal society. Sada often live in a separate enclave (*hijra*) next to towns and villages where they enjoy tribal protection (*hijra* status). The term is laden with meaning and beyond the scope of this paper. For a detailed discussion, see Paul Dresch, *Tribes, Government and History in Yemen* (Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 145-150. In Marran, the Huthis actually lived in the village and were highly respected and influential; according to one of Badr al-Din's disciples, in Marran "he was the government" (Hamidi, "Inscriptions of Violence," op. cit., p. 167). For more on *hijra* in this context, see Steven C. Caton, *Yemen Chronicles: An Anthropology of War and Mediation* (Hill and Wang, 2005).

¹⁹ The term "Huthi" to describe those engaged in military clashes with government forces was applied by the media. The group has not objected to the term, though they also call themselves *Ansar Allah* on some of their websites (see for instance <http://sadahonline.org>). The term "Huthis" will be used in this paper, though this does not imply that those engaged in the clashes are for the most part ideologically aligned with the Huthi family. In fact, it is said that insurgents comprise four distinct groups, with the majority being tribesmen defending their villages against state violence. Of the other three, a small group is fighting for *sayyid* and Zaydi rights, another minority embraces a clear ideology and has "symbolic or political ties with Iran," while the third group consists of armed men with purely financial motivations. See International Crisis Group, *Middle East Report*, No. 86, op. cit., p. 5. It is also worth noting that although the terms "Saada Conflict" and "Huthi Conflict" are used in this paper, Arabic-language sources refer to the conflict as the "Saada Wars."

²⁰ Depending on the source, Zaydis make up between 35 and 45 percent of the Yemeni population. These figures include nominal Zaydis such as President Salih. The nominally Zaydi population is located mainly in the mountains around Sanaa and to the north, while Shafii Sunnis live along the coastal areas and in the south.

²¹ Zaydis are often seen as holding a middle ground between the two main branches of Islam and called "Sunni Shia" or "Shia Sunni," due to Zaydism's jurisprudential similarities to Sunni Islam. Most nominal Zaydis (for instance, President Salih), indeed, have been "assimilated in a broader non-sectarian Islamic arena as the identities [Sunni and Shia] gradually converged" (International Crisis Group, *Middle East Report*, No. 86, op. cit., p. 7).

²² Zaydis split from other Shia groups at the fifth imam, and Ismailis did so at the seventh. Imamis hold that the twelfth imam disappeared but will return. Unlike the other two, Zaydism lacks a significant geographical expanse (it is endemic to Yemen) or a well-known figure.

²³ These criteria were subsequently codified to include the following main ideas: the imam must be a descendant of Husayn or Hassan; he must be a scholar-warrior, both a *mujahid* and a *mujtahid*; he must rise up against unjust rulers as Zayd had; he must follow the Islamic principle of "commanding right and forbidding wrong"; and he must publicly declare his imamate, be recognized as such by Zaydi scholars, and take the *baya* (oath of allegiance) from the tribes that would support him.

²⁴ Two of the main branches are *Jarudiyya* and *Batariyya/Salihiyya*. The Huthis follow the Jarudiyya branch, named after Abu al-Jarud, initially a companion of Muhammad al-Baqir (Zayd's brother), who is said to have sided with Zayd after he launched his insurrection from Kufa. Jarudiyya is considered closer to imamism in that it believes in the explicit designation of Ali and considers the first three caliphs as usurping Ali's right to leadership. It also rejects prophetic transmission that does not come from the Prophet's family. Contemporary "moderate" Zaydi opponents of the Huthis have aligned themselves with the Batariyya/Salihiyya (although initially distinct, these two branches are often used interchangeably and thus are treated as a unit), which did not condemn the first two caliphs nor the companions, since the Muslim community had pledged allegiance to them. This group also recognized prophetic tradition even from chains outside of the Prophet's family. It is said that Zayd himself took a pragmatic view and accepted the companions and the first two caliphs. Some say that many of his followers abandoned him at the last minute due to his refusal to condemn the companions and that he himself did not believe the imamate should be limited to the descendants of Hassan and Husayn. For background on early Zaydism, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, eds., *Shiism: Doctrines, Thought, and Spirituality* (State University of New York Press), pp. 86-87; *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Brill, 2002), s.v. "Zaydism"; Ahmed al-Daghashi, *Al-Zahira al-Huthiyya* (Sanaa, 2009), p. 8; *Al-Huthiyya fi-l-Yemen*, p. 118; and Ayatollah Skaykh Muhammad Husain Muzaffa, "Short History of the Muslim Religious Schools and Sects," <http://www.imamreza.net/eng/imamreza.php?id=3042>, accessed May 10, 2010.

²⁵ The term for non-*sayyid* Zaydi scholars is *qadi*. The principal figure in the reformulation of Zaydism is Muhammad al-Shawkani, who was chief judge of the imamate in the nineteenth century. For more on al-Shaw-

kani, see Bernard Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkani* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²⁶ While Wahhabis are Salafis, not all Salafis are Wahhabis. Critics of Salafism in Yemen often use the term “Wahhabi” to denote Saudi Arabian influence, although the term Salafi will be used here. For a discussion on Salafism in Yemen, see Laurent Bonnefoy, “Deconstructing Salafism in Yemen,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2009.

²⁷ The mass deportation was a response to Yemeni support for Iraq during the first Gulf War. Many of the returnees brought back Wahhabi ideas obtained in the kingdom. For an interesting account of politics in the tribal regions with a focus on the Sunni *Islah* party, see Bernard Haykel and Paul Dresch, “Stereotypes and Political Styles: Fundamentalists and Tribesfolk in Yemen,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 1995, pp. 406-431. For an overview of the spread of Salafism in Northern Yemen, see Shelagh Weir, “A Clash of Fundamentalisms: Wahhabism in Yemen,” *Middle East Report*, Vol. 204, 1997, and Glosemeyer, “Local Conflict, Global Spin,” op. cit. On the distinction between Salafism and other Islamist groups in Yemen, see Laurent Bonnefoy, “Varieties of Islamism in Yemen: The Logic of Integration under Pressure,” *MERIA Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2009, <http://www.gloria-center.org/meria/2009/03/bonnefoy.html>, accessed May 10, 2010.

²⁸ Laurent Bonnefoy, “Deconstructing Salafism,” op. cit., p. 13. Also see Hamidi “Inscriptions of Violence,” op. cit., p. 168.

²⁹ Shelagh Weir, “A Clash of Fundamentalisms,” op. cit.

³⁰ Unless cited otherwise, information on the rise of the Zaydi revivalist movement comes from the al-Jazeera TV interview with Muhammad Azzan, April 10, 2007, <http://www.aljazeera.net/Channel/archive/archive?ArchiveId=1062168>, accessed May 10, 2010, and from “Muhammad Badr al-Din al-Huthi, Yujib ala Sual man hum al-Huthiyyun?” <http://www.aleshteraki.net/articles.php?id=798>, accessed May 10, 2010.

³¹ Bernard Haykel, “A Zaydi Revival?” *Yemen Update* 36, 1995, pp. 20-21. Countering the legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkani, which was seen as diluting Zaydism, was certainly on the group’s agenda. When a split occurred within the *Hizb al-Haqq*, for instance, the Huthi faction accused others of “Shawkanism” (Adel al-Ahmadi, *Al-Zahr wa-l-Hajar*, op. cit., p. 131).

³² Salafism, which is generally hostile toward other branches of Islam and the Shia, in particular, was painted as a foreign, Saudi-backed movement in a region weary of outside influence and where *sada* generally enjoyed good relations with tribes. See Sami Dorlian, “Yemen... al-Muhmal fi ma Qil ‘an Harb Saada,” *Islamonline.net*, February 17, 2009, http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1234631361480&pagename=Zone-Arabic-News/NWALayout, accessed May 10, 2010. Also see Dresch and Haykel, “Stereotypes and Political Styles,” op. cit. p. 415.

³³ Ahmed al-Daghashi, *Al-Zahira al-Huthiyya*, op. cit., p. 24. This was one of the president’s early concerns: so long as he could keep on eye on and control the group, he had no objection.

³⁴ For a thorough analysis of al-Huthi’s thought, based on the printed lecture notes, which together represent al-Huthi’s thought, see Abdullah Lux, “Yemen’s Last Zaydi Imam: The *Shabāb al-Mu’min*, the *Malāzim*, and *hizb Allāh* in the Thought of Husayn Badr al-Din al-Huthi,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 3, September 2009.

³⁵ See Ahmed Al-Daghashi, op. cit., pp. 20-21. Also see Ayman Hamidi, “Inscriptions of Violence,” op. cit., p. 168. “According to al-Huthi, the principal sources for the Zaydis are the Qur’an and the knowledge of the prophet’s descendants...” Such an approach is consistent with that of Salafism, with the obvious disagreement on what constitutes genuine and reliable prophetic tradition.

³⁶ *Aljazeera.net*, November 15, 2009.

³⁷ Ayman Hamidi, “Inscriptions of Violence,” op. cit., p. 169.

³⁸ The slogan was first publicly chanted at the Imam al-Hadi school in Marran, in January 2002. It is said, though, that Husayn al-Huthi first chanted the slogan in response to an image of Israeli soldiers killing a young Palestinian civilian who died in his father’s arms during the second intifada in 2000. Abdullah Lux, “Yemen’s Last Zaydi Imam,” op. cit., p. 390.

³⁹ *The New York Times*, March 22, 2003. http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/22/news/22iht-protest_ed3__6.html?pagewanted=1, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁴⁰ Ayman Hamidi, “Inscriptions of Violence,” op. cit., p. 169. Former ambassador Edmund Hull is said to have had “influence [that] allegedly far exceeded the powers of his office” (Iris Glosemeyer, “Local Conflict,

Global Spin,” op. cit. p. 45). According to John M. Willis, Ambassador Hull was somewhat derisively nicknamed “*al-Mandub al-Sami*” (The Exalted Envoy). John M. Willis, “The Crisis in Yemen: Guest Comment by Willis,” *Informed Comment (Blog)*, July 6, 2004, <http://www.juancole.com/2004/07/crisis-in-yemen-guest-comment-by.html>, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁴¹ Ayman Hamidi, “Inscriptions of Violence,” op. cit., p. 170.

⁴² Ahmed al-Daghashi, *Al-Zahira al-Huthiyya*, op. cit., pp. 54-55.

⁴³ Husayn al-Huthi’s admiration for the Iranian Revolution and the importance he gave the slogan may not be shared by all in the Huthi ranks, particularly as they attempt to reach an accommodation with the government. In a television appearance, for instance, Yahya al-Huthi notes that the slogan is “just words” and “no one has died, thank God; the United States still exists and Israel exists....” Minute 1:10 of the video contains the relevant material, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adIX8xvpyLo>, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁴⁴ *Nashwannews*, October 3, 2009. Many of Husayn al-Huthi’s followers who went to jail for repeating the slogan refused to disown their leader. Even under torture, they are said to have called for orders from him.

⁴⁵ It is argued that Husayn al-Huthi was pursued with such force because the republican government has been quick to curb the influence of anyone with strong leadership qualities and popularity in areas with pro-Imami sentiment. See Ayman Hamidi, “Inscriptions of Violence,” op. cit., pp. 181-82. A road in Tehran was recently renamed “Martyrs of Saada” and another named after Husayn al-Huthi. This prompted the Yemeni government to retaliate by renaming Iran Street in Sanaa “Neda Agha Sultan Street,” after the woman who was killed during anti-government protests in 2009. *The Guardian*, November 27, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/nov/27/iran-yemen-street-cred-rename>, accessed May 10, 2010. Although it is too early to speculate on Husayn al-Huthi’s historical impact, one may argue that his fighting to the death in the face of insurmountable odds may have already turned him into an inspirational figure in the honored tradition of the founder of Zaydism and of Shia Islam’s two most revered martyrs (Ali and Husayn). Abdullah Lux says of Husayn al-Huthi: “...what he really is, in the end, is the most recently martyred Imam of the ancient Zaydi line” (“Yemen’s Last Zaydi Imam,” op. cit., p. 427).

⁴⁶ See, for instance, al-Jazeera Satellite Channel, “Liqa’ Khas: ‘Ali ‘Abdullah ‘Salih,” p. 14, September 2009, <http://aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/8F400CBA-7EA9-46F0-BFF7-B27CDEC574A0>, accessed May 10, 2010. An English language version of the video is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82u9kVpAPoc>, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁴⁷ Interior Ministry Report to Parliament, cited in <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2004/07/10/4917.html>, accessed May 10, 2010. He was said to have circulated the book *Asr al-Duhur*, which was written by an Iranian cleric and states that the reappearance of the hidden imam will be preceded by an uprising in Yemen led by someone named either Husayn or Hassan.

⁴⁸ Ahmed al-Daghashi, *Al-Zahira al-Huthiyya*, op. cit., pp. 15-16 (author’s translation).

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 19. Abd al-Malik al-Huthi sent a letter to the president explaining that the charge that the Huthis deny democracy and believe in the imamate is in reference to their interpretation of traditional Zaydi doctrine, but does not reflect the group’s actual goals.

⁵⁰ The claim that the Huthis follow the *Jārūdīyya* branch of Zaydism is meant to place them outside of contemporary mainstream Zaydism.

⁵¹ In an article that was republished in various Yemeni newspapers, Muhammad al-Huthi responds to these allegations as follows: “... Those who claim we are outside of Zaydism... must define the rules by which we have gone beyond and outside of Zaydism.... Those who say we are Twelvers are clearly ignorant since every school has foundations and rules that separate it from others, and those who do not depart from these foundations and rules are not following that school. Just as there are similarities between us and the Twelvers, these similarities also exist between us and all other schools.” See “*Muhammad Badr al-Din al-Huthi Yujib ‘ala Su’al man hum al-Huthiyyun?*” <http://www.aleshteraki.net/articles.php?id=798>, accessed May 10, 2010. Author’s translation.

⁵² That is to say, politicizing certain Shia practices and questioning whether they are truly Zaydi inevitably turns the debate into a broader Sunni-Shia one. On the politicization of religious practice in Yemen, see Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, op. cit., p. 169.

⁵³ Shia, in general, have an unfavorable opinion of the third caliph, Uthman.

⁵⁴ For detailed discussion, see Bernard Haykel, *Muhammad al-Shawkani*, op. cit., pp. 150-158. *Tardiyya* is to follow their name with the phrase “*Radi Allahu ‘anhu*” (“may God be pleased with him”).

⁵⁵ The implication of *tawaqquf* (literally meaning wavering) is that, although the first two caliphs went against the Prophet's designation of Ali as his successor, the particular speaker cannot determine the gravity of the error by the two caliphs, given their support from the community, and thus suspends judgment.

⁵⁶ The Huthi position of *tawaqquf* in this regard is clear. See article by Huthi spokesman Muhammad Abdel Salam in *Almenpar.com*, October 12, 2010, <http://www.almenpar.net/news.php?action=view&id=1026>, accessed May 10, 2010. In an appearance by Yahya al-Huthi on the pan-Arab religious channel "al-Mustakillah," the host notes that most Zaydis practice *tardiyya*, yet some allege the Huthis teach people to curse them. Yahya al-Huthi responds, referring to the companions: "I neither love them nor hate them, I neither bless them nor curse them" (author's translation). Video available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnN59oibHdg>, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁵⁷ The above-mentioned show on "al-Mustakillah" features a rebuttal to the comments from Yahya al-Huthi. The speaker begins by bringing up Badr al-Din al-Huthi's interview and his praise of the imamate. More significantly, at the very end he notes that this is an opportunity for the Huthis to speak to all Muslims, particularly in North Africa (where the channel's audience is largest), and that by practicing *tawaqquf* they are being contentious toward other Muslims. Video available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WK6KgERBYiE>, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁵⁸ *Yemen Times*, December 8, 2009, http://www.yementimes.com/defaultdet.aspx?SUB_ID=20182, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁵⁹ In early 2004, authorities banned the festivities after three people were killed, allegedly by their own gunfire. The ban was lifted in 2007 for Saada. See <http://armiesofliberation.com/archives/2007/01/10/al-ghadir-day/>, accessed May 10, 2010. A large celebration was held in 2008 in Saada. In 2009, four people were killed in Dhimar in confrontations during the celebration.

⁶⁰ Ahmed al-Daghashi, *Al-Zahira al-Huthiyya*, op. cit., p. 49.

⁶¹ Muhammad Azzan and Abd al-Karim Jadban, two of the BY's most active "moderate" members, both spent time in Iran and in other places of Imami Shia learning. Badr al-Din al-Huthi resided in Qom for some time, where some allege he was converted to or at least influenced by Imamism. That these propagandistic allegations would receive currency is surprising. Yemeni Supreme Court judges who reviewed Husayn al-Huthi's lectures were unable to find references to imamism (Ayman Hamidi, "Inscriptions of Violence," p. 49). For more on how al-Huthi's thought falls within the Jarudiyya tradition but is certainly not Imami, see Abdullah Lux, "Yemen's last Zaydi Imam," op. cit., pp. 396-400.

⁶² A few days after the Saudi intervention in the conflict in November 2009, Iran's Arabic-language news channel (al-Alam) was banned from the two major Arab-TV satellites (NileSat and ArabSat), linked to the governments of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The operators cited a contractual breach, though the timing makes this questionable, particularly given al-Alam's strong anti-Saudi coverage in Yemen. The ban was rescinded shortly thereafter, but in January ArabSat again dropped the channel, citing technical problems.

⁶³ This according to Muhammad al-Mutawakel, a professor at Sanaa University. *The New York Times*, November 13, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/13/world/middleeast/13saudi.html?_r=1, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁶⁴ *Saba News*, October 18, 2009, <http://www.sabanews.net/en/news196080.htm>, accessed May 10, 2010. The same article quotes the Yemeni foreign minister as saying: "Iran's stance over the issue, either through its offers to help end the conflict or expressing its concerns about the escalating situation, has proved Iran is involved, hence, there is no need to talk about further evidence over the involvement."

⁶⁵ A surprising number of authors point to the fact that the United States has declined to put the Huthis on the list of terrorist organizations as proof of American support for the movement. The Huthis, for their part, believe that al-Qaeda is a creation of the United States government and part of a greater conspiracy to take over Yemen.

⁶⁶ Indeed, many Huthi fighters seen on their videos appear to be adolescents. See "Issue of Child Soldiers Raised in Yemen," UPI, November 23, 2009, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2009/11/23/Issue-of-child-soldiers-raised-in-Yemen/UPI-70641258992863/, accessed May 10, 2010. The accusation of using child soldiers has also been made against the government: see for instance, "Yemen: Child Soldiers Used by Both Sides in Northern Conflict – NGOs," *IRIN – UN Humanitarian News and Analysis*, December 10, 2009, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=87391>, accessed May 10, 2010. To some degree, many of the other charges refer to practices already existing in tribal areas.

⁶⁷ This can be seen as part of the government's survival strategy. As Wedeen notes, "Regimes can rely on spaces of disorder as a mode of reproducing their rule. Maintaining domains of disorder as a way of exercising control may not be a self-conscious or optimal strategy, but it has its own logic and efficacies for regime survival.... A regime's interests in survival can be at odds with processes of state formation — with the political will to monopolize violence and control territory" (*Peripheral Visions*, op. cit., p. 151).

⁶⁸ The government military response was heavy-handed from the outset. On June 19, 2004, the government bombed a market in Haydan District, killing and injuring civilians, something for which the president subsequently apologized and offered compensation to the families of those affected (Adel al-Ahmadi in *Al-Zahr wa-l-Hajar*, op. cit., p. 188).

⁶⁹ "Internal Displacement in Yemen Passes 250,000 mark," *UNHCR Briefing Notes*, January 29, 2010, <http://www.unhcr.org/4b62da829.html>, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁷⁰ In the first round of fighting in 2004, the government focused only on Haydan district, while this time from the outset heavy clashes took place in most districts of western Saada province. See "Fighting Forces 120,000 People to Flee," *IRIN – UN Humanitarian News and Analysis*, August 16, 2009, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=85731>, accessed May 10, 2010; and *Al-Wasat*, October 7, 2009, <http://www.alwasat-ye.net/index.php?action=showDetails&id=838>, accessed May 10, 2010. (Author's translation).

⁷¹ *Al-Wasat*, October 7, 2009, <http://www.alwasat-ye.net/index>.

⁷² See for instance *al-Eshteraki*, July 27, 2008, http://www.aleshteraki.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=4379, accessed May 10, 2010. Hussein al-Ahmar here calls the ceasefire decision a "betrayal of the nation."

⁷³ "Yemen: Constrained Response to Protection Needs of IDPs and Returnees," *Internal Displacement Monitoring Center*, July 22, 2009, p. 7, [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/\(httpInfoFile%2F6D020F4AD5C0A59DC12575FB0052665B/\\$file/Yemen+-+July+2009.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFile%2F6D020F4AD5C0A59DC12575FB0052665B/$file/Yemen+-+July+2009.pdf), accessed May 10, 2010. The area the Huthis controlled represents a swath from Saada city west all the way to the Saudi border.

⁷⁴ *Nashwannews*, October 3, 2009.

⁷⁵ The complexities of the struggle for succession are beyond what this paper can cover. Various members of the ruling elite, including members of the Salih family, groups within the ruling party, the alliance of opposition socialists and Islamists, and the sons of the deceased Shaykh Abdullah al-Ahmar, are all to some degree jockeying for power. Although Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar may not necessarily have presidential ambitions, he is likely to play an important role in the transfer of power (International Crisis Group, *Middle East Report No. 86*, op. cit., p. 15).

⁷⁶ His biography is illustrative: after receiving degrees in the United States and Jordan, he trained and worked in various administrative and military posts, was elected to the parliament in 1997, headed the charitable Salih Foundation, and is currently commander of the Special Forces and the Republican Guard.

⁷⁷ *Al-Masdar*, August 11, 2009, http://www.almasdaronline.net/index.php?page=news&article-section=10&news_id=1672, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁷⁸ Sami Dorlian, "Al-Muhmal 'an Harb Saada," *Islamonline.net*. The author notes that the system is more accurately described as one of Zaydi northerners controlling Shafii southerners rather than *sada* controlling the tribes.

⁷⁹ *Al-Eshteraki*, August 17, 2009, http://www.aleshteraki.net/news_details.php?sid=6626, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁸⁰ *Al-Ahale*, May 20, 2008, <http://www.alahale.net/details.asp?id=2568&catid=12>, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁸¹ Ibid. Author's translation.

⁸² Harf Sufyan lies north of a mountain range separating the al-Usaymat and Sufyan tribes, roughly dividing the two main tribal confederations of Hashid and Bakil. During the war to overthrow the imamate, it marked the division between royalists and republicans (Dresch, *Tribes, Government and History in Yemen*, p. 254). At a crude level of distinction, Hashid tribes fought with the republic, and Bakil sided with the royalists. Since 1962, many Hashid tribes have enjoyed general government patronage while the Bakil — broadly speaking — have been somewhat marginalized. The tribal demarcations are not exclusive; there can be Bakil regions within Hashid-majority areas and vice versa. While these tribal distinctions alone can no more explain the conflict than the crude Sunni-Shia distinction can, Hashid tribes for the most part support the government, with most Huthi backers coming from Bakil and the third and smaller confederation of Khawlan bin Amr, based in western Saada. President Salih's Sinhan tribe belongs to the Hashid and is jokingly said to be an acronym for "we shall rule until the last breath" (Dresch and Haykel, "Stereotypes and Political Styles," op.

cit.). Yet such distinctions may obscure more than they elucidate, given that loyalty may be divided within specific tribes, clans and even families.

⁸³ “Yemen: Clashes in Amran Governorate Could Spread – Analyst,” *IRIN – UN Humanitarian News and Analysis*, January 15, 2009, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=82385>, accessed May 10, 2010. This case demonstrates the relative arbitrariness in demarcating specific rounds of fighting, as clashes in the interim are in some cases at least as significant.

⁸⁴ On tribal fighting in the area, see, for instance, *Al-Eshteraki*, August 17, 2009, http://www.aleshteraki.net/news_details.php?sid=6619, accessed May 10, 2010. In mid-September 2009, 87 civilians were allegedly killed in a government attack on Harf Sufyan, with the UN voicing its concern. See <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/6AE9BE62-4CF8-4DD4-9BBF-F462AEFDBC22.htm>, accessed May 10, 2010. On the Saudi factor see, for instance, *al-Eshteraki*, January 17, 2010, http://www.aleshteraki.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=7393, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁸⁵ Dresch, *Tribes, Government and History in Yemen*, op. cit., p. 355.

⁸⁶ For a discussion on this, see International Crisis Group, *Middle East Report*, No. 86, op. cit., pp. 15-17.

⁸⁷ Overall Saudi financial assistance to Yemen is said to total \$2 billion a year, much of it development assistance. See <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601091&sid=aujvgTAIR5s>, accessed May 10, 2010. In 2007, Yemen received \$10 million monthly, and when fighting resumed in 2008, the Yemeni government was given \$3 billion in order “to put down the ‘insurgents’” (Ayman Hamidi, “Inscriptions of Violence,” op. cit., p. 172).

⁸⁸ See Shaun Overton, “The Yemeni Arms Trade: Still a Concern for Terrorism and Regional Security,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 3, No. 9, May 6, 2005, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=471](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=471), accessed May 10, 2010, “One can usually buy light weapons directly at such markets. Heavier weapons are available off-site.... People connected to the market insisted that nearly any conceivable conventional weapon was obtainable through the right contacts.” The author further notes that, by 2004, the Huthis had bought all their weapons domestically. In subsequent clashes, the Huthis seized weapons after taking over various military installations throughout Saada province. There have also been reports of illegal weapons transfers from government stockpiles to the Huthis. See, for instance, the case of Faris Mana’a, a major Yemeni arms trader and brother of Saada province’s former governor, who was accused of illegally attempting to funnel imported Chinese weapons to the Huthis. See *Mareb Press*, January 28, 2010, http://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=21930 and *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 3, 2010, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11390&article=555631>, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁸⁹ *Mareb Press*, August 15, 2008, <http://marebpress.net/articles.php?id=4058>, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁹⁰ See Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, op. cit., pp. 176-180.

⁹¹ “Muhammad Badr al-Din al-Huthi Yujib ‘ala Su’al man hum al-Huthiyyun?” <http://www.aleshteraki.net/articles.php?id=798>, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁹² James Robin King, “Zaydis in a Post-Zaydi Yemen: Ulama Reactions to Zaydism’s Marginalization in the Republic of Yemen,” *Shia Affairs Journal*, Vol. 1, 2008, p. 68.

⁹³ See, for instance, *almenpar.net*, November 19, 2009, <http://www.almenpar.net/news.php?action=view&id=1780>, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁹⁴ As Ayman Hamidi puts it, they have begun “to operate within the expectations of a transnational discourse of ‘modern citizenship’” (“Inscriptions of Violence,” op. cit., p. 177). For instance, in a recording from December 2009, Abd al-Malik al-Huthi focuses exclusively on what he calls the war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity perpetrated against civilians in the areas of conflict. The appeals to justice are made using the language of international human rights, rather than the language of Islam. Video available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_pC7tXPez4, accessed May 10, 2010. See also Abd al-Malik al-Huthi interview in *Asharq al-Awsat*, September 20, 2009, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=536701&issueno=11254>, accessed May 10, 2010.

⁹⁵ In its claim of responsibility, al-Qaeda claimed that the suicide bombing in al-Jawf province had killed Badr al-Din al-Huthi. The following day, the Huthis issued a statement saying that Badr al-Din al-Huthi had died of natural causes and had not been in the convoy that was attacked in al-Jawf. On January 29, 2011, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula declared on its website that it would launch jihad against the Shia of northern Yemen.

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